

COMMENTARY

DOES THE PEOPLE'S RULE DOOM DEMOCRACY?

Walter Lippmann's Diagnosis of Western Decline

OSCAR HANDLIN

ON THE cover of the February, 1955, *Atlantic*, the artist has skillfully caught the mood of Walter Lippmann's new book. Well back in the room, the figure of the author emerges from the indistinct clutter of papers that flow across the desk, the chest, the floor. The whiteness of his shirt and hair set off the shadows of his face, rigid in somber contemplation. His eyes, lidded over in thought, gaze down, absorbed in some portentous vision.

IF POPULAR democracy has sometimes been impatient with intelligence, intelligence has often thrown up its hands in exasperation with popular democracy. Why Walter Lippmann, one of America's foremost political commentators and a liberal democrat, should come to despair of the efficacy of democratic government is the question examined here by OSCAR HANDLIN, in an essay occasioned by the recent publication of Mr. Lippmann's book *Essays in the Public Philosophy* (Atlantic-Little Brown, 189 pp., \$3.50). Professor Handlin is, of course, well known to COMMENTARY's readers. Born in 1915, he received his education at Brooklyn College and Harvard University, where he is now professor of history. His *The Uprooted*, a study of immigration in American history, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1952. Among the other books of which he is author are *Adventure in Freedom* and the recently published *Chance or Destiny: Turning Points in American History*. "The American Jewish Pattern, After 300 Years" was his latest contribution to these pages, in October 1954.

The mood of imminent doom is borne out in the author's introduction to the book. He has been brooding, he tells us, about "an historic catastrophe," about the decline of Western society. The premonition of that decline came to him in 1938 as he saw the approach of another world war with the democracies unprepared and unarmed. After the war, his foreboding "was in a terrible measure realized"; there was "no mistaking the decline of the West." This volume, then, *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, is an inquiry into the reasons for the "grave errors in war and peace" responsible for that decay.

Lippmann now believes that the fatal disorder set in in 1917 when there occurred "an unrecognized revolution within the democratic states." Until then, there had been a clear delimitation of functions in the Western politics; the executive, "the active power in the state," had exercised the power to govern, while the people through their elected representatives had given their consent to be governed. Diplomacy, like the other crucial affairs of state, had been managed by statesmen undisturbed by the confusing clamor of the populace. "Life was secure, liberty was assured, and the way was open to the pursuit of private happiness." Such was the idyllic state of the pre-war world.

Under the terrible pressures of the world

war, however, the statesmen of the democracies lost courage and, fearful of demanding the necessary sacrifices of their people, shifted to the masses the burden of responsibility for decision. Ever since, the executive in the democracies has not really governed but has allowed itself to be swayed by an inchoate public opinion. Hence there could be no lasting peace after 1918, there could be no adequate preparation for the inevitable war in the 1930's, and there could be no orderly settlement of the issues raised by the defeat of fascism after 1945. The masses, lusting after soft solutions, obstructed the measures necessary to their own salvation; and the helpless democracies drifted, and still drift, to their doom.

Only one frail hope exists of halting the trend, Lippmann warns. The decline may yet be reversed if a revival of the "Public Philosophy" once more makes clear the appropriate positions of governed and governors. But given the circumstances of the times, Lippmann cannot be confident that such a revival will come about. Hence the underlying pessimism of his book.

WALTER LIPPMANN'S tortured argument deserves cool and extended analysis. Its political theory is shallow, and its comprehension of the events of our times is vague and uncertain. But it expresses in a significant, if extreme, form the fears and doubts stirred up among some American intellectuals by the liberalism of their society.

To understand the import of this book, it is necessary first to pull away its flimsy factual props and expose its profound misunderstanding of recent history. Lippmann offers in evidence of the culpability of the masses three crises in which excessive regard for public opinion seems, to him, to have driven the democratic statesmen into wrong decisions: the peace of 1918; the preparations to resist fascism in the 1930's; and the strategy of unconditional surrender in the Second World War. In each case he is completely in error.

The consequences of the failure of the Treaty of Versailles were without doubt dis-

astrous, although it may be there were other causes, too, for the subsequent troubles of Europe. But the reason why the treaty took the form it did is by no means that set forth by Lippmann here. Lloyd George, Clemenceau, Wilson, and Orlando, he asserts, dictated a punitive peace rather than one of reconciliation because the people "would not countenance a workable peace" and insisted upon vengeance. Having "vetoed reconciliation," they "made the settlement unworkable."

In sober fact, the people's wishes had little to do with the actual terms of the treaty. The outlines of those terms had already been drawn with some precision in the series of secret agreements the Allies signed with each other before 1917. Certainly the passions of war could not casually be turned off at the armistice; but they scarcely affected the calculations of the statesmen who had already made up their minds as to the shape of the map of the new Europe. By a curious lapse of memory, Lippmann, who was present at Paris at the time, has altogether forgotten about those agreements.

A similar gap in memory is evident in Lippmann's account of the reasons for the democracies' tardiness in resisting Hitler. The people had become "too pacifist," he maintains, and refused to prepare for war, relying instead on "unarmed appeasement" and "unarmed isolation."

Yet the order of events in the decade before 1939 points to quite another conclusion. Through the 1930's, the statesmen in power—Chamberlain, Laval, Sir John Simon, and even F.D.R.—were far slower to see the threat of fascism in Japan and Ethiopia and Spain and Germany than was public opinion. And the description of the democracies as "unarmed" is fantastic. The French army, the British and American navies, were far from neglected and far from pacifist in their purposes. Through those very stringent years, the American Congress never once failed to give the armed forces the appropriations requested of it; and the record of the legislatures of the other democracies was probably as consistent.

If anything, the appearance of massive strength in fortifications and battleships made the Western statesmen overconfident. It is difficult to remember, in the light of the outcome, that as 1940 opened, the French and the British were quite willing to take on Russia as well as Germany. The Allies had no doubt that the Nazis would soon be beaten; after all, when the invasion of Norway began Chamberlain exulted in the certainty that Hitler had missed the bus. The democracies were unprepared, not because they were unarmed or because their people had been hesitant to resist the evils of fascism, but rather because the statesmen and their military advisers showed a fatal disposition to select the inappropriate weapons. Paradoxically also, in that decade, popular opinion was readier to perceive the potentialities of the new, and ultimately the effective, weapons than were the military technicians.

It is no easier to establish the guilt of the people for the failure to draw a happier peace out of the war against Hitlerism. Lippmann would have us believe that the masses, infuriated with the delusions of the Four Freedoms and Unconditional Surrender, "would not allow their leaders to think about an eventual peace with their enemies, or about the differences that must arise among the Allies." Now there is much about the events of the last fifteen years that we still do not know; and no historian would venture to speak with certainty and without qualification until more facts are available. But a few features of wartime diplomacy are already clear, and among them is the fact that, for better or worse, the public slogans of the Four Freedoms and of Unconditional Surrender did not in the least trouble the consciences or inhibit the actions of the Allied leaders. For good or for evil, these shadowy phrases were readily tailored to the necessities of the immediate occasion.

Indeed, the source of the postwar difficulties seems rather to have been the series of compromises made among the wartime partners. And those compromises were arrived at in secret conferences without the pressure of public opinion, and often with

the public completely deceived or in the dark as to their nature. Whatever one's judgment as to the desirability or necessity of these compromises, it certainly calls for a long leap of the imagination to hold the people responsible for them.

In truth, Lippmann's revolution of 1917 was no revolution at all. Public opinion has not since that date been decisive in the determination of foreign policy; nor, it may be said, was diplomacy in the democracies, before 1917, ever free of some degree of popular pressure. Certainly in the United States, the public always participated actively in the formulation of foreign policy. This whole aspect of Lippmann's argument is fallacious and without meaning.

IT is also irrelevant to the genuine intentions of his book. Upon examination, the dramatic thesis of the crisis since 1917 proves to be but a trick, a contrived peg upon which to hang a larger, more serious argument. Brushing aside all the frothy rhetoric about the agonizing decline of the democracies in the last forty years, we begin to approach the heart of the Lippmann thesis.

This, after all, is not a book Lippmann began to write in 1945 or even in 1938; and the ideas it contains were not evoked by any particular crisis. Distrust of the popular element in American government and uneasiness as to the direction of democratic development have rather been constant themes in his writing and thinking. In *A Preface to Politics*, in *Drift and Mastery*, in *The Phantom Public*, and in other books, he has been working toward a broad theory of politics. In the *Public Philosophy* it stands forth fully developed. Within it, the whole focus on 1917 is but a fortuitous distraction. It is Lippmann's general theory of politics, with its roots in an important phase of American Progressive thought, that is really worth understanding.

In Lippmann's longer view of the history of democratic polity, the significant break comes not in 1917 but in 1789. For some two thousand years until then the practice of government had been dominated by the

"Public Philosophy," by the belief that there was a law above the ruler and the people, above the whole community of mortals. Out of that belief sprang the traditions of civility, including as their three great notes, "the three values of Liberty, Equality and the brotherhood or Fraternity of all mankind." The Public Philosophy received expression in a variety of historic incidents and documents, such as the English Revolution of 1688, the American Revolution of 1776, the Bill of Rights, the Declaration of Independence, and the American Constitution. Toward the end of the 18th century, however, the hold of the philosophy on Western society was undermined. Insidious enemies attacked its principles and destroyed public faith in it. The decline of Western democracy, its loss of capacity to govern, is the end result; and that is why the revival of the Public Philosophy is inescapably necessary.

Lippmann also explains how the Public Philosophy has been undermined in the last hundred and fifty years. The decisive assault was launched by the "Jacobins," men resentful of their exclusion from the government, who used the conception of popular sovereignty to justify their own seizure of power. Engaged in pulling down rather than conserving authority, they abandoned the traditions of civility and elevated the revolutionary act to an end in itself. Preoccupied with power, they arrived finally at the doctrine that their ends justified any means and thus supplied a basis for modern totalitarianism. Having subverted modern education, the "Jacobin heresy" became "the popular and dominant theory in the schools" of the democracies. Jacobinism stands revealed therefore as the essential enemy of the Public Philosophy and of Western society.

There are painful ambiguities in Lippmann's conception of the Public Philosophy, as it is related both to his hopes for the recovery of Western society and to his diagnosis of its ills. By his own account, that philosophy for almost two thousand years proved altogether compatible with an extraordinary variety of forms of government—the Roman imperial order, medieval feudalism,

the absolutism of the 17th century. Those polities were, to greater or lesser degrees, tyrannical; with none of them were associated the values Americans attach to their democracy. If the Public Philosophy has been elastic enough to embrace the despots of the past, it is difficult to see how it will protect us from those of the future.

THAT difficulty is inherent in Lippmann's conception of the Public Philosophy. He urges all men to accept the supremacy of law, the governors to govern in accordance with principles "upon which all rational men of good will, when fully informed, will tend to agree," the governed to acquiesce in the rule of the governors. The duty of the citizen is thus revealed in the experience of Socrates who refused to escape the unjust sentence by which Athens condemned him to death. His first, barbarian nature urged him to escape. But his "second and civilized nature" preferred to yield to the law of the state.

For Socrates, however, there was no law but that of the state; if he cherished the law he had no choice but to obey the state. Lippmann on the other hand wishes to believe in a natural law, anterior to and more universal than that of the state. What is his citizen to do in the event of a conflict between the two? Lippmann never confronts that crucial question because he fancifully identifies the law of nature with the law of the state that is its sole expounder and interpreter. It really does not matter then whether his citizen obeys because the statutes of the governing power embody the law of nature or obeys simply out of fear of the state's sanctions. His sole function is to obey.

Lippmann never once, in this book, realizes that the conception of a law of nature is meaningful only insofar as it is independent of the law of the state. Historically, the expounders of the doctrine of a natural law valued it precisely because it provided the individual citizen with a standard of judgment against which to assess the particular acts of government. And that process of assessment was futile if its only outcome were acquiescence; its significance springs rather

from the path it opened to civic disobedience against the unjust acts of the state.

To some extent, the inability to understand what the idea of natural law has meant to those who expounded it accounts for Lippmann's wild belief that the "Jacobins" were responsible for the decline of the idea. "The Public Philosophy," he insists, "is in a deep contradiction with the Jacobin ideology," a "morbid development" which, alas, "is, in fact, the popular doctrine of the mass democracies." As Jacobinism gained currency toward the close of the 18th century, it stifled the traditions of civility, of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and of the Public Philosophy rooted in respect for natural law.

Unhappily, Lippmann is willfully blind whenever his discussion veers to the "Jacobins." The refusal to see or to remember blocks out the thought that it was the French Revolution with which the concepts of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity were associated in Europe. Far from weakening the respect for natural law, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen gave that idea its widest currency in the 19th century.

But then Lippmann's Jacobins have nothing to do with the members of the historic political party; they are the fantastic figures of his own imagination. To create them, he must first draw a distinction between them and the respectable revolutionaries of our own tradition. The American Founding Fathers, Lippmann assures us, were quiet conservatives who objected to George III's tyranny but "were not saying that there was *no one* who was fit to be the ruler of a free people." In the soft, mellifluous flow of this prose, we almost forget that that was precisely what the Founding Fathers were saying; and that the government they created was without precedent in the West, being without king or nobility or establishments, or privilege or status.

IF LIPPMANN excludes the Americans from the companionship of the "Jacobins," he more than compensates by the variety of types he associates with them. Indiscrimi-

nately he jumbles together a procession of thinkers from d'Holbach and Diderot to Marx and Lenin, who have only this in common, that not one of them was actually connected with the historic party of the Jacobins. (Condorcet indeed lost his life on the guillotine in resistance to them.) This strange agglomeration of theorists Lippmann endows with a common attitude—hostility to order, with revolution an end in itself.

Now not even of the Jacobins proper is it accurate to say that they opposed "the moral foundations of authority." Of the 18th-century *philosophes*, and of their intellectual heirs, that judgment is an utter travesty. Effectively, the only function of the designation "Jacobin" is to smear, by association with ideas that were not theirs, the dominant exponents of the liberal tradition in 19th-century Europe.

If we separate out from Lippmann's mish-mash the thinkers among whom there was continuity of ideas, from Diderot and Voltaire and Condorcet down, we shall find that it was they who were in their times the great defenders of the idea of natural law. They, above any other group, insisted upon constitutional process and the rule of law; and they most consistently upheld the traditions of civility, of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

And conversely we shall discover that it was their opponents, conservative and radical, who most violently assailed the concept of natural law. Marx and the Hegelian apologists of the Prussian state proceeded from almost identical premises in their assaults upon liberal ideology, just as Lenin and the Czar's advisers used almost identical notions of *raison d'état* in subversion of, or resistance to, constitutionalism. Intellectually, the weightiest attacks upon the conception of a natural and universal law took their points of departure in the writings of Burke and Montesquieu, conservative theorists for whom nevertheless Lippmann expresses perverse and extravagant admiration.

It is no coincidence therefore that the firmest barriers against the encroachment of present-day totalitarianism have been erected in the United States, in Great Britain, in

France, and in Scandinavia, where the liberal democratic traditions are strongest. The polities least capable of resistance, on the other hand, have been those in which the established order stifled the development of liberal democracy. "The enfranchised masses have not, surprisingly enough, been those who have most staunchly defended the institutions of freedom," asserts our author. As we compare the states which survived with those which fell, the United States or France with Russia or Germany, and speculate on which masses were enfranchised, we arrive, not surprisingly, at the conclusion that this assertion and the line of argument it follows from are thoroughly erroneous.

There is no more justification for Lippmann's attack upon liberalism than for his assertion of popular responsibility for the failures of government since 1917. In both cases he indicts what Americans have always understood as democracy, and in both he reveals a deep animus against the "masses"—that is, against the people of a democracy. That animus has roots in the context of ideas that shaped Lippmann's development as a thinker and a publicist.

LIPPMANN'S distrust of the people is not simply to be explained as an aspect of the search for a conservative American tradition so pathetically fashionable among some intellectuals today. He proclaims himself still a liberal democrat, and although he has turned his face against many of the ideas associated with liberalism and democracy, he has a valid claim to that affiliation.

Nor is Lippmann's pessimism to be explained simply as the reaction to personal disappointment. More than any American of our time, he has gained the position to which all intellectuals aspire: he is listened to. He was scarcely out of college when he had found a respected place in journalism, a place from which he could always set his opinions before the makers of policy. No doubt he must think now, as he moves into his fifth decade of journalism, that he has been more listened to than heard and that his exhortations have rarely influenced the

course of events. To the extent that he believes in the importance of his own role, he may now and again wonder at its ineffectuality; and self-examination occasionally confronts him with his errors in the past. Yet no trace of inner doubt intrudes into his writing. His disappointment is not with himself but with his society.

With regard to society, his expectations were those of the Progressives of the first decade of the century. The reformers of the time were by no means a homogeneous group. But some of the intellectuals among them—Herbert Croly, Lincoln Steffens, and the writers for the early *New Republic*—were defining a political position that still supplies Lippmann with his ultimate point of reference.

We may understand that position by asking a brutal question. Why does Lippmann, a democrat, believe that democracy, not totalitarianism, is in the decline? The Western governments, he asserts, need the "strong medicine" that dictatorships supply, and Hitler understood with "the insight of genius" the longing of the masses to be ruled. Lippmann's answer is that the totalitarian state is more capable of governing. Its ruling elite are surrounded by "an aura of majesty, which causes them to be obeyed. That aura emanates from a popular belief that they have subjected themselves to a code and . . . a discipline by which they are dedicated to ends that transcend their personal desires."

We know this judgment is delusive. Few Nazi or Bolshevik bosses were ever naive enough to ride through town protected by their aura of majesty alone. The very existence of elaborate regimes of terror showed the unwillingness of those elites to rely only on loyalty for obedience. The enormous power the totalitarian state disposes is usually sufficient to stifle resistance. But when the occasion has presented itself, the masses have demonstrated an inclination to desert that indicates they do not altogether love their rulers.

Furthermore, the same yardsticks by which Lippmann measures the decline of the democracies would also reveal the weakness

of the dictatorships. Nothing in the Western record equals in ineptitude the comic quadrille in which Hitler, Stalin, Matsuoka, and Mussolini played at being partners between 1939 and 1941—and without the distractions of public opinion. No American error since the war matched in magnitude the Soviet blunders that helped create the Marshall Plan and NATO and restored the power of Western Europe.

The judgment that the totalitarian powers provide more effective government does not proceed from the evidence of recent events. It proceeds rather from Lippmann's definition of the function of government. The "natural and necessary duties" of a government, he writes, "have to do with the defense and advancement abroad of the vital interests of the state and with its order, security, and solvency at home." These interests are entirely abstracted from the interests of the people who happen to be residents of the state; Lippmann is insistent that the people, in this sense, are not the proper objects of the state's attention.

The people as voters therefore cannot be adequate formulators of policy; they know only their own interests, not those of the state. The true public interest, on the other hand, is "what men would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently." The decisions of politics, Lippmann holds, should be arrived at much the way a series of equations is solved; and assemblies elected by the masses of voters are incapable of solving equations.

And here we reach the inner core of Lippmann's Progressivism. For who but the disinterested social engineer is most at home in the higher mathematics of politics? Back then, in the youth of the century, the intellectuals nurtured the noble dream of a total reform of their society. Human nature was malleable and they, the elite, would reshape the suffering masses. Their ideas would unfold in plans of action which would be implemented through politics.

The plans were not realized; the outcome was not what the necessities of logic dic-

tated. Yet those who had put their faith in the idea and the plan knew that they had seen clearly, thought rationally, acted disinterestedly and benevolently. The fault had not been in themselves. Then where? As Progressives they could see no end for history but Progress, and they could account for the tragedies of their time only by finding someone to blame. The fault was in the brute mass, incapable of receiving the idea, unable to follow where it should be led.

IT HAS been a long way intellectually for Walter Lippmann since the days when he went to work with Lincoln Steffens. But in the face of the intractable democratic mass, he feels the same discomfort as did many of the Progressives of his youth. And after all these years Lippmann still does not understand wherein the popular conception of government differs from his own.

The people have not held that the end of government was to advance the interests of the state, but rather that it was to "establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty." Politics was thus one of a variety of means of social action directed at goals meaningful and important to the people as individuals. They have therefore considered themselves competent to judge the degree to which particular acts of government approach or fall short of their general social ends. Political decisions have not consisted in the discovery of mathematically correct solutions to equations but rather in choices made among feasible alternatives that might advance the interests of the greatest number.

Hence the people have not often turned for guidance to an intellectual elite. "Providence," they have believed, "never intended to make the management of public affairs a mystery, to be comprehended only by a few persons of sublime genius." Rather, like the Lilliputians, they have supposed that "truth, justice, temperance, and the like" were "in every man's power, the practice of which virtues, assisted by experience and a good intention, would qualify any man for

the service of his country"; and generally in "choosing persons for all employments" they had "more regard to good morals than to great abilities."

And in retrospect, we cannot believe they were wrong. "Successful democratic politicians," Lippmann tells us, "are insecure and intimidated men." To an American the figures of his own most successful politicians spring immediately to mind—Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Lincoln, the Roosevelts, Wilson, and Truman. Which among them were the insecure and intimidated? And which among them failed both to gain a full measure of trust from the people and all the powers he needed to govern as an executive within the Constitution?

The miracle of democratic leadership is the continuing refutation of Lippmann's fears. The virtue of popular government is to maintain and strengthen those governors who remain close to the people, and to weaken those who attempt to pull away.

There is no cause for despair. The disheartened were already reading Toynbee before 1939, Spengler even earlier, and Brooks Adams long before. Their forebodings of decline were the record of their own loss of faith. Meanwhile the record of the democracies, imperfect as it may be in the face of the monumental problems of the past half-century, nevertheless justifies the confidence that this last best hope on earth will do more than survive.

LIQUIDATION SALE

CHARLES G. BELL

FROM the flat fields of the Delta and waves
of woods,
We come to a little town with its cotton gin,
Beulah or Boyle, the pattern is the same,
As weird as familiar. How many hours
Have I sat in an oven car by these clapboard
stores?

That was in the depression, a terrible time,
Between the dust and flood, the people
drained;
I would drive my father then from town to
town,
While he talked, encouraged, farmed the
debts, and came.
He was known to all and honored as the
judge.

Well, he deserved some honor. He saved
their skins
Often when city firms would have had them
sued,

Eased them along to his peril, gave up his
fees,
Himself the most in debt and the life-dream
torn
By politicians and a failing farm.

Private loss and Hitler—our world betrayal.
At night I have seen him when he could not
sleep
Sit up in bed to light his pipe, the weak
Flame rising and falling like the pulse of his
hope,
Revealing a face whose lines made me weep.

So I live it all again in the sun-baked towns,
That scourge of bitterness which must return
As rust from these tin awnings, painted
now—
Where like a token the great "Liquidation
Sale"
Blossoms in red on Solomon's old store.

CHARLES G. BELL, who teaches in the humanities at the University of Chicago, is the author of *Songs for a New America* (1953), a book of verse. This is his second appearance with a poem in our pages.